DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 335 428 JD 028 094

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TITLE Black Women in White Institutions: A Study of Ten Narratives.
PUB DATE 7 Apr 91
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, April 7, 1991).
PUB TYPE Historical Materials (060) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Autobiographies; Black History; *Blacks; Educational Discrimination; Educational History; *Females; *Higher Education

ABSTRACT

This paper is based on 10 firsthand accounts of black women who graduated from historically white institutions. Four of the narratives came from autobiographies, those of educators Fanny Jackson and Lena Beatrice Morton, social activist Mary Church Terrell, and political activist and author Angela Davis. Three of the other accounts were taken from memoirs written for institutional histories, two were elicited by the author, and one appeared in a journal. The narratives vary in the following ways: (1) they span over a century, from the 1860s to the 1970s; (2) one was written while the author was still in college, the others at least a decade after graduating; (3) all but three women came from lower-middle-class to middle-class families; and (4) the nine institutions represented cover a wide range of geographical areas. Despite the differences in the narratives, common themes recur: (1) the importance of economic considerations in choosing a school, including availability of good scholarships and proximity to home; (2) the importance of color, much more than gender, in shaping these women's college experiences; (3) the initial hostility or skepticism from professors and the need to prove themselves academically; (4) the importance of social support systems such as sororities in determining their satisfaction with their college experience; and (5) participation of some of the women in protests against social injustice. Eleven references are included. (CJS)

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Black Women in White Institutions: A Study of Ten Narratives

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American Educational Research Association
April 7, 1991
Chicago, IL

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I recently completed for Garland Press an anthology on the history of black women's higher education in the United States which included an introductory essay and a variety of documents. Among these were a number of firsthand accounts of women's college experience including ten from Black women who graduated from historically white institutions. My presentation today is based upon those accounts.

THE NARRATIVES THEMSELVES

The authors of these accounts may not be typical even of black women who attended historically white colleges. These women were exceptional; in four of these ten cases, these narratives came from autobiographies the women had written about their eventful lives; these women are educator Fanny Jackson Coppin, social activist Mary Church Terrell, educator Lena Beatrice Morton, and political activist and professor Angela Davis. Three of the remaining six accounts were from college alumnae who evidently remained visible enough in adult life to be solicited for their memoirs in conjunction with collecting materials for institutional histories. I solicited two others when I realized that I needed more material for the anthology, and the remaining essay appeared in the **Journal of Negro Education**, ostensibly submitted by the student who wrote it.

Although the ten narratives have certain themes which form the basis for this paper, they vary in a number of ways. They span over a century. The earliest is by Fanny Jackson Coppin who graduated from Oberlin College in 1865 and for whom Coppin State

in Baltimore, MD, is named. The most recent is an account by a woman who graduated in the 1970s from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, a public institution usually called Virginia Tech.

Another variable is the person's life experience between the college years and the writing of the memoir. One narrative was written while the individual was still a student, but the rest of the narratives were written at least a decade after graduation. Post-graduate life experiences may have colored the lens through which the memories were viewed. Angela Davis, for example, published her autobiography in 1974, thirteen years after her graduation, when she was still widely known as a political activist, and her account of her college years is filled with references to her political awakening and to oppressed people throughout the world.

All of these women obviously valued education, and most of them were lower middle to middle class with three exceptions. Oberlin graduate Mary Church Terrell was the daughter of a wealthy Memphis land speculator, and Wellesley graduate Jane Bolin Offut was the daughter of a prominent New York lawyer. On the other end of the scale was Fanny Jackson Coppin, who had been self-supporting since her early teens; she depended entirely upon scholarships, her own work, and help from friends in the East to maintain herself at Oberlin.

Altogether nine institutions are represented (Oberlin had

two accounts) and offer a wide geographical range from New England to the West Coast. Since nearly all integrated schooling took place outside the South, it is not surprising that the South is not represented until the 1970s when integration began in earnest. Four private institutions are represented: Oberlin, the University of Chicago, Wellesley, and Brandeis; another four institutions are public: the University of Cincinnati, the University of California at Berkeley, Madison College (which is now James Madison University) located in Virginia, and Virginia Tech; one institution which enrolled about 3100 students in 1942 when the narrative was written was not identified by the author.

A common thread in the narratives is the value the writers and their families placed on education. Ida L. Jackson, who graduated from the University of California at Berkeley in 1922, and Lena Beatrice Morton, who graduated that same year from the University of Cincinnati, both mentioned that their families had moved so that they could receive a better education. Jackson had exhausted all the educational opportunities Mississippi and Louisiana offered her when her family moved to Oakland, California, to improve her education and to free themselves from the racial prejudice of the South (253). Morton's family had moved from Kentucky to Ohio so that she could obtain a college degree (33). While the fact that these families were willing to move to improve their children's educational opportunities is noteworthy, this willingness was not limited to families who sent

their children to historically white schools. I encountered several other instances of moving for the sake of education in the memoirs of women who went to historically black institutions, and other historians have commented as well on the high value that blacks placed on their education (Anderson, p. 5).

Most of the writers explain the reasons why they chose the institution they did. The earliest two writers chose Oberlin, and their reason for doing so is not surprising: it was the first institution (and in their time the best known institution) to admit blacks. Oberlin opened its doors from its beginning to both African-Americans and women, and it was the first in the country to award the baccalaureate degree to a black woman, to Mary Jane Patterson in 1862. Fanny Jackson Coppin heard of Oberlin while working in New England and went there, she noted, because it "was then the only College in the United States where colored students were permitted to study" (12). (She actually was incorrect; Antioch College had also admitted blacks by that time). Coppin went there in 1860 and graduated five years later. In the 1880s Terrell too chose Oberlin because of its admission policy and its high academic reputation.

Financial considerations were significant in institutional choice. In half the narratives the women went either to an institution in their hometown or chose an institution because of winning a scholarship. The women at Brandeis and Virginia Tech apparently chose their respective institutions because of winning

scholarships; one of them, whose father had died when she was two, described herself as an "academic prostitute," selecting "the best and the most secure scholarship package for four years" (Thomas, 1). The women who attended the University of Cincinnati, Berkeley, Madison College, and the anonymous institution lived within the vicinity of their institutions and lived at home, possibly because of segregated or non-existent housing facilities for blacks and possibly to lower the cost of their education.

Despite the academic prestige of a number of institutions represented, only two women mentioned academics as a reason for choosing their respective institutions. Edythe Hargrave, the student who attended the unnamed white college in 1942, chose her hometown institution not only because it was in her hometown but also because of its reputation. "My brother had been graduated from this college; and, also, I had heard it been said that a colored student who graduated from that institution was highly respected for his scholastic ability" (484). Sheary Darcus Johnson selected Madison College in the 1960s because it was in her hometown and also because she thought its library science program had more prestige than did the one at Virginia State University, one of the state's historically black institutions (6).

SUCCESS AND DETERMINATION TO SUCCEED

Related themes in nearly all these accounts from the earliest to the most recent are a determination to succeed and to uphold the honor of the race. "I never rose to recite in my classes at Oberlin but I felt that I had the honor of the whole African race upon my shoulders," reported Coppin from Oberlin in the 1860s (15). Hargrave in the 1940s wrote that

> I entered a white college with the determination to confront all of the white faces over there, and show them that I could be one of them scholastically, even if my color were different, even if I were conspicuous. Mine was the determination to be a good student (484).

In the 1960s Johnson reported a similar experience:

> There were times when people would say how did you exist there at Madison when it was all white and had only two blacks in school? But I believed that I could make it down inside. And I believed that, if I would push on even if the classes were hard, that if I studied hard enough, and that if I walked up to the professor and said, "I need help!" he would give it to me. Because I believed those things, that's the way I went at it.

ACADEMIC TREATMENT

Whether a determination to succeed was translated into academic success was due in part to what kind of treatment the women received in the classroom. Both Coppin and Terrell at Oberlin reported good treatment by their professors though they were initially discouraged from choosing the classical (i.e. baccalaureate) track because of their gender. Terrell recalled being asked to recite in her Greek class before Matthew Arnold,

the famous English intellectual, writer, and literary critic, as a means of demonstrating to him that African-Americans were capable of such achievement. Perhaps their good treatment was due to Oberlin's long-held commitment to racial and gender equality, for their experience was not replicated at other institutions.

A few women suffered or related blatant discrimination. Morton at the University of Cincinnati in the early 1920s described experiences in two classrooms of professors seating the white students alphabetically and then giving blacks seats alone at the back. In one of those classes, Morton resolved to prove that "I was as intelligent, well bred, and affable as any member of the class" (32). She did A work and was seated with the rest of the M's during the following semester. Jackson implies that her difficulty in getting her master's thesis approved in the mid 1920s was related to its subject: the development of Negro intelligence (256). Jane Bolin Offut at Wellesley in the 1920s reported that professor asked a Black friend of hers to play an Aunt Jemima figure in a French skit but withdrew the request when Offut protested (91). In her senior year a guidance counselor told her that her plan to go to law school was impractical because of both her gender and her color (92). Offut did not heed the advice, graduated from Yale Law School in 1931, and at age 31 became the first Black woman judge in the United States.

Other women sensed hesitancy on part of their professors.

In the 1940s Hargrave at the anonymous school noted that because she was a minority the professor learned her name before any others' and that she made it "her aim to show my professors that I am good" (485). Gabbin, a graduate student at the University of Chicago in the late 1960s, noted, "I soon discovered that some professors did not know what to make of me. After my first semester, one man who acted as my academic adviser asked,

> "Why aren't you having trouble here?" His question not only registered his curiosity about my better-than-average performance but also his dismay. All that he knew about the superior education boasted by the university, all the assumptions that he harbored about the limited ability of black students from small, historically black institutions were being upset by what he saw as a troubling exception (3).

Thomas, the 1970s graduate had a similar experience:

> In some classes I could sense the hesitation of the teachers. Often I found that once I proved that I could handle the work, the tensions eased. But I frequently felt that I, as a minority student, was called upon to prove myself in situations where the white student was not. (5)

Despite initial classroom problems, most women felt that they were eventually treated fairly in their academic classes. However, physical education in the first half of the twentieth century remained a problem area. Morton at Cincinnati bitterly resented a practice of making black women take swimming lessons on Friday afternoons, after the white women had finished for the week. Then over the week end the water was changed, and the pool made ready for the next week's lessons. Hoping that the segregated swimming policy would soon change, Morton postponed the mandatory swimming lessons to her senior year but finally

decided that the necessity of earning a degree outweighed the humilation of the Friday afternoon classes. She enrolled in the class and graduated in three and a half years. Jackson at Berkeley around the same time had a similar experience with swimming. When the campus gymnasium had burned, the local YMCA had volunteered the use of its facilities for women students. When Jackson and another black friend showed up for swimming class, they were told there had been a mistake. The nearest pool they could use was the San Franciso YMCA, and the commuting time and the cost of transportation made doing so prohibitive. Hargrave at the unnamed institution in the 1940s reported no specific problem with swimming but noted a general unease with physical education as a whole:

> In the Physical Education Department I have discovered more prejudice than anywhere else on the campus....I feel more that I am a Negro in those classes; a keen sense of inferiority empowers me there....I avoided the discomfiture and hurt pride by attending classes with another Negro friend of mine for a while, but since her death, I have been forced to enroll in classes alone. Also, I have been engaging in all the individual sports possible....(485)

SOCIAL LIFE

Social life is obviously an important part of the college experience, and it was this area of college life that seemed to create problems for a number of women studied. Both Coppin or Terrell at Oberlin in the 1800s took pains to explain that they were well accepted by their white peers, but many of the subsequent narratives were not so positive.

Two women at institutions with no black organizations noted their exclusion. Offut at Wellesley recalled being rejected for a sorority known for its interest in social problems, despite her being an honor student (91). On another occasion, she made reservations to use the Wellesley Club in Boston and was given a room in the attic (92). Hargrave noted that in making her decision to attend a nearly all white institution, "I realized, however, that a Negro entering a large institution of thirty-one hundred students of whom twenty were Negroes would lack the social life that goes with a well-rounded edcuation" (484). She occasionally attended social events sponsored by the college itself but was excluded from the majority of social life that was centered around sororities and fraternities.

Had Hargrave chosen a different white institution in the 1940s, her experience might have been different. Black fraternities and sororities originated in the early 1900s, and by the 1920s both Jackson and Morton benefited from their existence at their respective institutions. Jackson explains that at Berkeley in the 1920s she was one of eight Black women, five of whom formed the Rho chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, whose initial chapter had been founded at Howard in 1908. Her home served as chapter headquarters, and her presidency brought her into contact with university officials who later served as her mentors and influenced her later life. She summed up the experience of these sorority sisters by writing: "At last we

began to learn something of the function of student government on campus, and we began to feel we were a part of things" (255). Black Greek life had also appeared off campus at the University of Cincinnati by the 1920s. Morton reports that her mother hosted a party for the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity one Friday evening, while she remained secluded in her room studying for a Saturday morning logic test. Thomas, the 1970s graduate, expressed reservations about some racial overtones present in both the black and white Greek systems but finally elected to join a Black sorority:

> Despite the racial overtones, I elected to pledge a black sorority. Although black fraternities and sororities sponsored a number a [sic] social functions, as did the white organizations, the sorority I joined also emphasized service to the community. I had been given the privilege of getting an education, and I felt that this was an opportunity to give back to the community. And that we did, through visitations to the elderly and infirm, clothing and food drives, etc (6).

Students who did not have a black social network had different experiences in the 1960s and 1970s. Johnson, who attended Madison College located in her hometown maintained her community roots but also participated in the school choir. By the time she graduated, there were enough blacks to form a gospel choir which served both spiritual and social needs (9 and 10).

Angela Davis at Brandeis in the early 1960s found herself being only one of three blacks in her freshmen class, and loneliness is a major motif of her narrative:

> I felt alienated, angry, alone and would have left the campus if I had had the courage and had known where to go. Since I was there--to stay, it seemed--I lived with this alenation and began to cultivate it in a romantic sort of way. If I felt alone, I refused to feel sorry for myself and refused to fight it by actively seeking friends; I would be alone, aloof, and would appear to enjoy it.

She eventually developed her own support system in the campus's numerous foreign students and the protest movement.

PROTEST

Davis was not the first Black student to protest, of course, but her experience in rallies, teach-ins, and demonstrations

signifies a new and bolder protest than those of Offut or Morton in the 1920s. She, Gabbin at the University of Chicago as a graduate student in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and Thomas all mention national events as shaping their consciousness, a theme not seen in the earlier narratives.

Although several of the women in this survey eventually attended graduate school, Gabbin's narrative is the only one about graduate school experiences. In Chicago she was able to draw upon the black community for her social support while pressing for an increased Black consciousness within the University of Chicago itself:

> When I enrolled at the university in September, 1969, I was eager to learn and even more concerned about proving that what I was doing was relevant. "Relevant" that was an important word in the late sixties because so many of us carried with us the weight of being "firsts" and with that came the uncomfortable realization that we could not betray or forget those blacks who had paid very dearly for the benefits that we were reaping. The Little Rock Nine and Daisy Bates, the Greensboro students who endured the harassment and violence of hostile whites in non-violent sit-ins, the Freedom Riders who rode from Alabama to Mississippi amid the threats of beating and firebombings were carried with me as I entered those classrooms where I studied Mark Twain with Hamlin Hill and made Shakespeare and George Bernard Shaw a part of my vocabulary because of the incomparable teaching of Elder Olson (4).

Gabbin later organized a petititon campaign over the lack of black faculty that culminated in the university's offering George E. Kent, a tenured position in African-American literature in the English department.

Thomas's protest at Virginia Tech in the mid-1970s was over

the playing of "Dixie" at football games and homecoming events, and the struggle was not easily won. Some students felt that their participation in a protest would jeopardize their scholarships, and other students felt that the issue was simply unimportant. The administration at first began to enforce seldom used rules and created new ones to contain the protest. By the time Thomas was a senior, though, the students had won and the song was no longer played.

CONCLUSION

This survey of nine narratives of black women who attended historically white institutions is not a sufficiently large sample from which to draw definitive conclusions. However, the a few common themes from these narratives may provide guidelines for further research on this topic. One of those is the importance of economics in making choices for school attendance; a number of these women chose schools largely because they were in their hometowns or provided good scholarships. Another theme is that color, more than gender, was an important variable in shaping these women's college experience; whatever limitations were placed on them because of their gender seemed relatively insignificant in their narratives. Another commonality was initial hostility or skepticism from their professors; nearly every one of them commented on a need to prove themselves academically. A final theme is the importance of social support

in determining the student's satisfaction with her college experience.

Despite the span of over a century in these accounts, the similarites among them are most interesting. I would suggest that futher research could be undertaken in developing a comparison of the experiences of black women who attended historically white colleges with their peers' experiences at historically black institutions. Another approach to examining these women's experiences would be to compare them with the data Jacqueline Jones has collected about black women's experiences at historically black and historically white colleges. Much more work on the history of black women's higher education needs to be done.

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